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The reaction to Benetton's pope-kissing ad lives up to the Christian stereotype

There seem to be two subjects that Christian groups complain about loudly – sexuality and the status of Christianity



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Benetton's poster showing Pope Benedict XVI kissing Ahmed el Tayyeb, imam of the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

It would be easy to get the impression that Christians spend all their time complaining about sex. The latest case of religious outrage doesn't even go that far – it's about kissing. Benetton has withdrawn a series of adverts after the Vatican threatened legal action. They featured the pope kissing an Egyptian Muslim leader.

The controversy may have done wonders for Benetton's advertising budget. Without going to the expense of producing all the posters, it has now got far more publicity than it could have hoped to generate through conventional methods. The alternative explanation – that it was too naive to realise that people would be offended – is difficult to believe.

The Vatican has confirmed the popular stereotype of Christian anger.

There seem to be two subjects that Christian groups complain about loudly – sexuality and the status of Christianity.

To be fair, the Vatican sometimes makes relatively progressive statements about economics and the environment, but the media tend to ignore them, concentrating on the pope's reactionary views on sexuality and gender. Many churches do speak out strongly about issues such as international debt, government cuts and corporate tax dodging. There are also more radical Christian groups, such as those that have backed

the Occupy movement. As a queer Christian, I am delighted there are many Christians who are in favour of equality for LGBT people, although we are failing to speak up as loudly as the homophobes.

We are not doing enough to reduce the impression that Christians put most of their energy into opposing homosexuality and defending their own status. The pope laments the decline of Christianity in Europe. Christian leaders such as the former archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, want to take Britain "back" to being a Christian country. Certain sorts of Christians have been used to privilege and the rise of multi-belief societies is frightening for them.

In Britain, they try to cling on to remaining privileges, such as bishops in the House of Lords and opt-outs for faith schools. Perhaps because views on sexuality have changed relatively speedily, this has become an issue for them to focus on, along with their desire for Christianity to have a privileged status – as if Jesus taught his followers to claim privileges for themselves that they denied to others.

Take a look at groups such as Christian Concern. In the last year, it has put out press releases about homosexuality, abortion and the legal status of Christianity – but none about poverty, government cuts, economic inequality, climate change, Trident, the arms trade or the wars in Afghanistan and Libya.

This is odd given the group's desire to "infuse a biblical worldview into every aspect of society". The Bible mentions money, and particularly the exploitation of the poor, far more often than sex.

Christian Concern might be dismissed as a small, rightwing group, although the ideas it peddles – particularly the absurd notion that Christians as a whole are facing discrimination in Britain – have gained ground far beyond their natural constituency.

What is most worrying is the failure of institutional churches to clearly disassociate themselves from this rhetoric. This is important if their own work on economics is to gain the same sort of attention as rants against gay people.

This is not to say that Christians should ignore issues of sexuality. With the Catholic church gripped by child-abuse scandals, it is vital to speak out against sexual violence. Christians should also have a lot to say about the commercialisation of sexuality and marriage. Christians can apply life-centred, Jesus-centred ethics to both sexual and economic issues, encouraging people to relate to each other on the basis of love and mutuality rather than selfishness and greed.

This is a challenge to economic and political structures as well as to common attitudes to sexual relationships. As the Vatican complains about Benetton's offensiveness, there are other Christians who look forward to the day when nobody bats an eyelid at the sight of two devoutly religious men kissing each other.

- This article was amended on 21 November 2011. It was originally edited to change the phrase "queer Christian" to "gay Christian" but the author is in fact bisexual and prefers the term "queer". The change has now been reversed

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